

WELL-BEHAVED PEOPLE SELDOM MAKE HISTORY; LUKE 16: 1-13; SEPTEMBER 22, 2019; A. CAMERON AIRHART; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I sure miss Tom Yorty today. Especially today. Commentators on today's passage routinely remark that this parable is the most perplexing of Jesus' parables. Indeed, Luke himself seems clueless about what to make of Jesus' story. And this is a parable that preachers actively avoid preaching on, happily grabbing the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah so they can spread the balm of Gilead. I would have done this, too, if not for the fact that Pastor Yorty specifically coupled this crooked manager parable in Luke with the Keats poem, all but requiring me to come to grips with this parable. Frankly, given that Pastor Tom picked who would preach on what Sunday, I think I've been set up by a very cunning senior pastor, who, in this instance, resembles the leading character of this morning's parable. But enough of my gripping: on to the parable, but do say a prayer for the preacher.

Jesus is still on the road to Jerusalem with his disciples, and he attracts crowds in every locale he visits. He is by now a celebrity, so when he passes through a place common people surround him to hear his words, to plead for healing or just to touch him. Important people want to be seen with him and even be considered one of his friends or patrons, and Jesus is routinely invited to dinner and given lodgings by the good and the great. So, it's a little ungracious of Jesus to tell a series of parables about the role of wealth in society. The wealth parable Luke tells just before our parable today is about the prodigal son, and we love its theme of forgiveness and redemption. The wealth story that follows is about a rich man in hell and a poor man in heaven, and we love its theme of social justice.

But today's wealth parable, well, this was a shocking story in the first century and it is still shocking today to rule-followers like us. Indeed, most of us live and move and have our beings inside of rule-governed bureaucracies. Birth certificates, passports, driver's licenses, social security cards, green cards, insurance papers, tax papers, Medicare papers, immigration papers, FAFSA forms, Form 990, W-2, W-4, I-9, 501-C3, 401K, *ad nauseam*. We spend hours of our days satisfying some regulation or other, not to mention *almost* stopping for stop signs and red lights. Most of us here, schooled to follow rules from a young age, have achieved success partly because we are so good at following the rules. Indeed, we think that abiding by the rules is a requirement for being a good person. And here comes Jesus, telling a story that approves of a criminal who breaks all the rules. No wonder no sane pastor of a middle class American church preaches on this passage. And, by all means, keep the kids away from this story, lest they doubt the meritocracy we have built.

And yet this passage isn't really about wealth at all; it's about life, and having life abundantly, and its shocking hyperbole is brilliantly used by Jesus to get our attention, to jolt us into hearing what is really being said. That's why I chose to use Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the passage, because Peterson understands why Jesus praises a crook, in order that "you'll live, really live, and not complacently get by on good behavior."

It's a big temptation to equate rule-keeping with godliness, as if the rules we live by in society, in our individual lives, or in our church life are eternally true. It's easy to do when things are settled and prosperous, and many of our personal and cultural habits were set in the prosperous twenty years that preceded the economic crisis of 2008. Remember? The Soviet Union had collapsed and our way of life had won. Our only task was preserving our world by keeping the rules. Our confidence made us blind, though, to the degree of racial injustice structured into our world, to the growing economic inequality

encouraged by those who wrote the rules, to the environmental costs of western prosperity, to the continuing violence in the world that was leading to a world-wide refugee crisis. To prosperous, cocky Americans, our era seemed to be the best of all possible worlds, and whatever imbalances that still existed were being gradually ameliorated, as long as no one rocked the boat too much. And so, by all means, don't preach about this embarrassing parable of Jesus.

Our illusions were shattered in 2008, and the clear picture window through which we constructed our rose-colored world was reduced to shards and splinters. Our confidence was replaced by fear, and we used the shards of our old confidence as weapons to defend our faction and attack others. Some weaponized the Bible, using it to lash out against those who interpret passages in new ways. Some weaponized science and sneered at any claim to knowledge that isn't grounded in the scientific method. Some weaponized skepticism, and turned it into cynical self-centeredness that craves success for me and mine at any cost. Some weaponized patriotism, and used it to exclude and demean others.

And, so, we have become a sorry lot. We can identify with Jeremiah's lament, "**The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?**" In our tribal divisions, we have become like the fevered man in Keats' poem, who cannot live dispassionately, but destroys his inner peace with fierce and untrue creeds. Such a person, Keats writes, unknowingly spoils her salvation even though she wants grace and harmony so badly. She should really imitate the rose, the plum, and the enchanted creatures of the sea, who know what real life is. But the pull of a "**fierce miscreed**" made up of shards and splinters is too strong. We are left to stew in our passionate opinions.

Into this badly broken world this parable of Jesus comes with new found immediacy, offering a view of the world that looks truer to our current situation. Listen to Jesus' conclusion again:

Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.

How can we live out these words? How can we be smart? How can we creatively survive? What are the bare essentials? How can we really be alive instead of just behaving? I venture the answers lie in holding our opinions and ideas lightly, dialoguing with each other, and in silent reflection, listening to the voice of the Spirit, listening for the quiet signal through the noise.

These past few weeks, writing this sermon has forced me to practice such listening, and here are some reflections.

First, we want to be good members of our community and nation, especially now, but how should we act in concert with the movement of God in the world? A good place to start is to try actively to understand the viewpoints of others—their fear, their pain, their ideas. This takes humility and patience and education. We are doing better at listening to our community's African Americans and refugees, but we need to listen better to rural people, to poorer people and to younger people, who all have legitimate grievances. Maybe our rules of good behavior need to change because the rules themselves are unjust and stacked in our favor.

Closer to home, we need to constantly reevaluate what are the essentials of our church fellowship—how should Westminster Church embody Christ in the Buffalo metro? We have a pretty good

understanding of ourselves, but how does our self-understanding need to be adjusted for the 21st century? We've been good at this kind of self-evaluation in the past, but we need to stay good at it. We have new challenges that need attending to: for example, younger Americans in great numbers are no longer attending any church; if this grieves your heart like it does mine, how can we shape Westminster to reverse this trend in our fellowship?

Third, Marcia Buhl was eloquent last week about our need to make the health of the environment a Christian priority. Until recently, the environment hasn't been high on our list of concerns. Taking our cue from the world around us, we've had little sense of urgency about environmental threats. Marcia's clarion call last week was reinforced for me in an interview with Greta Thunberg by William Brangham on PBS' Newshour, and she said a fascinating thing about her sense of urgency, and our lack of urgency. Let me read a little of the interview:

William Brangham: There is seemingly so much evidence around us. We see wildfires, droughts, heat waves, intensifying storms, melting in the Arctic and the Antarctic, extinction of species. And yet, as we were discussing, the evidence is there before us, but it does seem that the sense of urgency is not as intense as you feel it ought to be. And I'm just curious why you think that is.

Greta Thunberg: I mean, of course, it could be many different things, but I think it is because humans are social animals. We follow the stream. And since no one else is behaving like this was a crisis, then we see that and we think, then I should probably behave as they do.

William Brangham: Just go on with life as usual.

Greta Thunberg: Yes. But, for me, I have — I am on the autism spectrum, and I don't usually follow social coding. And so that's why I go my own way. And I think that is a very strong reason why people just continue, because they don't see anyone else reacting to this.

William Brangham: You think your autism in some sense has given you an insight into this or a way to act in response to this that others may not have?

Greta Thunberg: That could be, definitely.

As a church, have we ignored biblical teaching about our responsibility to creation because we have been following the "social coding" about the environment? Have we become American consumers first and followers of Jesus second? We need to stop complacently getting by on good behavior and start examining our Christian consciences.

Finally, we need to ask whether we have personally exchanged good behavior for authentic living. Soren Kierkegaard tells the story about a man who was so detached from his real self that one day he woke up to find himself dead. Is that fellow you? Are you going through the motions of being alive, surviving on the approval of others? Are you enslaved to your own ideas about duty and rule-keeping? Are you playing it safe? Did you know that you worship a God who wants you to be extravagantly alive, using your wits in risk-taking ways to help bring about God's *shalom*? I ran across this week an account of a Cornell University graduate whose life represents what I'm talking about. He was born in New York State and raised in Iowa. He walked away from his father's lumber business and a career in law to take a job with the YMCA working with college students. Always using his wits, looking for new angles, he travelled internationally with the YMCA, and then organized the World Student Christian Federation,

and from there became a driving force in the worldwide ecumenical movement. He organized relief efforts after the First World War, raising about \$4 billion in today's money. He is the only Cornell University graduate to win the Nobel Prize for Peace. He was a close friend of Woodrow Wilson, who tried to get him to take the presidency of Princeton University, but, as you can tell, he had better things to do. He knew D.L. Moody, he knew the Pope, he knew the Archbishop of Canterbury. He convened the first ecumenical missionary conference in Edinburgh and he was a founder of the World Council of Churches. He called himself a Christian "essentialist" for he rejected the miscreeds of the fundamentalists and the modernists. By being temperate, he became the most influential Christian in the world in the first half of the 20th century. His name was John R. Mott, and he is largely forgotten, for he left no fortune nor headed any institution. But he lived out today's parable to the fullest.

And he did leave a legacy: his son, Dr. Fred Mott, served as his father's secretary before becoming a rural public health expert. He became the Deputy Minister of Public Health for Saskatchewan, Canada under the Baptist minister/politician Tommy Douglas, and together they organized the first public single-payer universal health care system in North America, a system that was expanded to become Canada's national health care system. I was born in Saskatoon in 1955, one of the first babies born under universal health care. My mother was so grateful she named me after my doctor. Little did I know that my family owed something to John R. Mott's decision to follow into the unknown Christ's call on his life. And, in a remarkable coincidence, I am now working in Buffalo with Andrew Mott, Fred Mott's son and John R. Mott's grandson, who as the founder of the Community Learning Partnership in Washington, D.C., is working to improve the effectiveness of Buffalo's grassroots community organizers. When we really live, the ripples of goodness expand over generations. So, stop playing it safe. That crooked manager has much to teach us after all.

AMEN